

Our Divine Call to Preparation
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Please listen to our scripture for today that come to us from Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” May our God add a blessing to the reading, hearing, and doing of God’s holy word.

Lent is my favorite season on the liturgical calendar. During Lent, I am mindful of the journey Jesus took to Calvary. I am mindful of the disciples who gave up everything to follow this man who was so unconventional, but who oddly made sense. I am mindful of the disciples’ overwhelming fear as they watched the final events of Jesus’ life unfold. I’m mindful that the disciples put all their trust and hope in one man only to have him murdered. And lastly, I am mindful of how great a sacrifice was made for me, by Jesus and by my ancestors, so that I would experience life more abundantly. I am in awe of just what this Lenten season means and offers us.

Our text for this first Sunday in Lent is Jesus’ baptism as found in the gospel of Mark. Many of us may not have even noticed Jesus’ baptism and wilderness experience in this gospel. We are familiar with Jesus’ baptism and temptation in Matthew’s gospel. It is an expansive text. Jesus is tempted to turn stones to bread, then tempted to throw himself off the temple pinnacle and lastly tempted to bow down and worship Satan. But in Mark’s gospel we don’t have any juicy details of what happened in the wilderness! Jesus’ temptation is wrapped up in one verse. Just one verse—verse 13.

He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

What? That’s it? What happened with the wild beast? Was he mauled by a lion, hunted by hyenas or chased by a rhinoceros? Where is the rest of the story? Pastor Tim reminds us that the Gospel of Mark is a different type of gospel because there are few details of events and stories are truncated. Well, that’s certainly is true here!

Another difference between Matthew’s baptism and temptation story and Mark’s accounting is that in Mark’s gospel a voice comes from heaven and says, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased. In Mark, Jesus is the only one who hears this voice. In Matthew all those at the baptism witnessed the divine proclamation. But, in Mark’s gospel it is a private moment.

Isn’t that how our calls to service usually happen? We are called personally and privately. Seldom is there a group around when the Holy One speaks. When that still small voice spoke within you and said, I need

you to work with children, or to be a social worker, or a teacher, an organizer, an engineer, a researcher, a pastor, odds are it was a personal experience not a group event.

I wrestled with God about my call to ministry. Being a woman in ministry certainly didn't sound like the party job I was hoping for. Yet when I finally said, OK God I'll do it just stop bugging me and promise you will never leave me, I then heard angels. There was no one else in the room, only me. And I heard angels cheer and sing.

While only Jesus heard the divine confirmation in Mark's gospel, all who read or heard these words would have been familiar with the prophet Isaiah when he wrote about the coming messiah. Isaiah wrote (42:1),

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.

After Jesus was baptized the text reads that the Spirit immediately drove him into the wilderness. The concept of testing the hero would have been a familiar feature of ancient texts. In the Hebrew Bible, Israel was tested as they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. Here Jesus is tested for 40 days. In biblical numerology, the number 40 symbolized an extended period of time not necessarily just 5 ½ weeks. Jesus was in the wilderness a long, long time, but no harm came to him. The angels waited upon him. The potential for harm was there, but the angels took care of Jesus.

It makes perfect sense to me that after receiving his divine call, Jesus would go away for an extended period of time. Doing the work of the Lord is no joke. It calls for resilience, which is our Lenten theme. Doing the work of the Lord could cost us our lives. Jesus knew that. When we are called to follow the way of Jesus or to engage in our life's work we must prepare.

Preparation may mean retooling—getting more education, perhaps even an advanced degree. Preparation may mean shadowing someone called to a similar field. Preparation means making sure your heart and head are right. Are we ready for the notoriety, heartbreak, to be misunderstood, to make mistakes and be corrected, to have others jealous of us, are we ready to stand alone? Is our head, right? Is our heart right, and are we physically ready for the work ahead? In more spiritual language, we must count the cost of discipleship. Yes, it could cost us our lives.

Jesus took 40 days to prepare for the work set before him. During Lent, we have 40 days to prepare for the work that is before us. What are you preparing for this Lent? What is that divine call upon you this year? Is it to stop playing it safe, and to stop trying to blend in? Are you preparing for the work of the Lord by getting rid of all busy work, so you can actually **do** the work of the Spirit? Sometimes we find busy work to distract us from the real work we are supposed to be doing. Somebody says Amen. Are you preparing for your divine assignment by getting your body in shape, so you have stamina to follow the way of Jesus?

We usually talk about preparing for a Christ event during Advent—before Christmas. But during Advent, we often get distracted by gifts, decorations, parties, and family time. During Lent there are no distractions of gifts, holiday baking, lights, or decorations. Today we have the opportunity to say yes to following the way of hope and purpose as witnessed in the adult Jesus. Our Lenten task is do what Jesus did, not just admire the baby in the manger.

At the end of his time of preparation, Jesus emerged saying,
“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.”

The time is fulfilled, in other words, it's time. My friends, we are in the fullness of time. The Greek word used here is *kairos* not *chronos*. *Chronos* is time we mark with our watches and calendars. The word *chronology* has the same root as *chronos*. We know that today is February 21, 2021. We measure time in seconds, minutes, hours, days, and years.

But *kairos* is God's time. Being in *kairos* time is being in God's perfect time. No Fitbit, Apple Watch, or Rolex can measure that. When everything is in place, we experience the movement of the Holy. ***Kairos***. Jesus said the time his people had waited for, for generations was at hand. *Kairos* is upon us, the kingdom of God has come near.

Beloved, I believe we are in a *kairos* moment. In many ways it feels like the ground beneath our feet has shifted. Everything is changing around us, the planet is groaning in travail, from global warming. I have no words to express the heartbreak of what happened in Texas this week all because of global warming, human greed, and poor utilities management. I received a FB post from an elderly woman who was a deacon at MZ before moving to TX. She posted that she was now living in her car because the frozen pipes in her home had burst and there was water all over her house. No electricity, no heat, no water. An 80-year-old woman living in her car. This is a *kairos* moment.

Political systems are being challenged. Our democracy is under siege from white supremacists and spineless politicians who refuse to say enough is enough. This pandemic has shown us over and over the disparities in medical care between BIPOC and white people. A greater percentage of BIPOC have died from COVID-19, but over 60% of the vaccines have gone to white people. Longevity of whites has gone down a year and for black Americans whose life expectancy was already low has now decreased even more by 2.7 years erasing all gains of the last 20 years. We are in a *kairos* moment

Genocide is real in China, Myanmar, Iraq, Iran, Nigeria, and Sudan. We are in a *kairos* moment. The time is now.

The spiritual challenge to walk in the way of Jesus is upon us. We have 40 days to repent and prepare. Repentance is part of preparation. We are not perfect. In fact, we have screwed up a lot. On Ash Wednesday, Pastor Sam of Japanese Baptist church encouraged us to be honest with ourselves during Lent. Confess our failing, our sin, and our cavalier attitude toward those living in the margins. Jesus preached repentance as well as blessed are the peacemakers. He said repent and believe in the good news. Repent and believe in the gospel. Repentance is more than saying I'm sorry. To repent is to make different choices and to go another way. Believe in the gospel, make choices for Jesus. Choose the way that leads to justice, wholeness, life, and joy.

During Lent, we have 40 days to get it together and then to step out in faith to do the work of the Lord. Our theme this Lent is Resilience. We can do the hard work of loving our neighbor, but we must be resilient when it gets hard. We must be resilient and speak up when it gets hard—not give up but speak up. Social activist Audre Lorde said, your silence will not protect you. There is an old gospel song that was sung by the late Rev. James Cleveland,

I don't feel no ways tired
Come too far from where I started from
Nobody told me the road would be easy,
I don't believe God brought me this far to leave me.

Resilience my friends. The way of the cross requires resilience. Jesus considered the cost and said yes. What do you say my friends? The time is now and the kingdom of God is near. We are in a Kairos moment. Jesus said, repent and believe in the gospel.

We don't have to go it alone. We have one another and we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses cheering us to move in love. There is an African proverb that says if you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together. We must walk together for we need one another to survive.

And all the people of God said Amen.